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Cloak, Dagger, Swimsuit . . .

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How often do America's hardest-working spies need to take a vacation?

The super-secret Central Intelligence Agency let the answer to that intriguing question out from beneath its cloak last week. And in doing so, it raised a series of other equally grave questions going to the very heart of the operation of our international intelligence apparatus.

Spies' need for leisure time, away from the humdrum cloak and dagger existence, came to light when a House Armed Services Committee

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voted out a bill recommending certain adjustments in the personnel practices of the CIA, our Number One spy factory.

The revisions had been requested by two CIA bosses—Adm. W. F. Raborn (ret.) and his successor, Richard Helms, who just took over two months ago.

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Last week, while Helms was creating a diversion on the Senate side of the Rotunda, explaining his letter-writing proclivities, the House group quietly approved the CIA request that our spies be given special, government - subsidized vacations once every two years or twice every three years.

Uncle Sam would pay the transportation of the spy to leisure land, and his salary while there, of course. The spy, however, must pick up the rest of the tab—doubtless guaranteeing that the U.S. operatives would be staying mostly in cold-water pensions, where they would be unlikely to meet alluring counter-spys.

These new emoluments, it should be stressed, would go only to those spies laboring in "hardship posts."

What are hardship posts? Where are they? Sorry, says the CIA, that would be telling. How many hardship posts are there—or how many spies are eligible for the vacations?

The CIA would never divulge that

sort of data—not even in a letter to the editor.

Exploring the ramifications of the proposal, it seems to me that the CIA may have made this request without thinking the whole thing through. For certainly the problems conjured up by this seemingly harmless scheme boggle the mind.

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For instance, take the question of double agents—and Nikita Khrushchev and our former spy chief Allen Dulles once agreed with hollow humor that both countries probably pay many of the same agents.

If the United States sends a double agent on say a month-long vacation to the Riviera, how will the spy explain it to the Russians? Or will he demand that the Russians give equal treatment?

And if too many double agents are gone on such double vacations, how will either country get any information? Who'll spy at the store while they're gone?

Or, suppose one of our gents in a "hardship" post is living as a camel driver in the United Arab Republic, spying on Gen. Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Russian spies who infest the U.A.R. spying on our spies.

Can our man reasonably get three weeks off from camel driving to loll about Majorca?

And what of our pallid-faced spies posing as slave laborers working in underground munitions plants in Czechoslovakia? How could they explain that Virgin Islands suntan?

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It seems to me, however, that the greatest danger would be that foreign governments might soon learn the favorite spots where the CIA is sending its people on vacation, and might start sending their own attractive female undercover agents there too—"where the spies are," just as vacationing U.S. girls go "where the boys are."

Pretty soon, the CIA might well be hit by a mass of desertions, with the defecting spies wiring back to Helms:

"Sorry about that, Chief!"